



GEREFORMEERDE MINACHTING



*Growing up in a very religious
protestant family*



“Such suffering either kills you or ennobles you. [...] Any gay person who survives the combination of contempt and invisibility long enough to create himself is, to me, just breathtaking.”ⁱ

From the day I was born, it was hammered in — with an enormous fanaticism and coercion — that having god in your life and forming a family of your own is essential to be a complete human being (volwaardig bestaan). Not just by my parents and three siblings, but also by my large extended family. This was painful, because I knew early on that I was one of the “foolish bridesmaids” who didn’t bring oil for their lamps. For the lucky reader who doesn’t know what I am talking about, foolish bridesmaids are the non-believers who according to this biblical allegory would be excluded from the wedding (heaven). The contempt was not mild. I’ll never forget how my father—after having finished the evening dinner prayer made the statement how awful it was that he had to pray while an infidel was sitting at the table. But then the worst was that the other four on the table remained silent and didn’t even try to comfort me in private afterwards. Now, I stopped believing that stuff already when I was still quite young, but it still has been painful to be part of a family that treasures those stories.

I can understand that parents want to teach their children what worked for them. So, I don’t mind my family being overjoyed during confirmations, engagements, getting married, pregnancies, births, and baptisms. But it isn’t right if one is considered a third-class person when these things are not part of one’s life like they have not for me. And that happens continuously both explicitly and implicitly. They find it natural to make comments making clear that life must be empty without kids. Or when they find you upbeat, they tell you explicitly that they think you are in a relationship because you seem happy. Even in 2022, they cannot imagine that there are reasons for a person who is single to be upbeat. How cruel to make that so explicit.

What made it all worse was that my talents were never recognized by my family and if they were solidly established by my accomplishments and clearly recognized outside the family, then I would get at best very modest compliments. The abundance of joy that I saw my family express for what defines success for a protestant (believing in god, getting married, etc.) were *never* expressed for my accomplishments. This denial of my talents and/or lack of praise started when I was very young and has basically continued until this day. When I was so dumb to let my family know that the LSE has enough confidence in me to appoint me Deputy Head of the Department for education, then I get an email telling me that this is bad news according to both my father and my sister; surely I must be worried about this

appointment. The email did not contain a single compliment and not even congratulations. The difference with the reactions I received from non-family members was very stark indeed. Apparently, I am not suited for such a position according to my family. This email was especially painful, because I have not shared bad news with my family since I was a young boy. In fact, I never shared any of the pain I felt growing up gay and didn't even tell them about my friends dying during the 80s and 90s. Why did they think that — suddenly — I would start sharing bad news with them?

A related reason why I have felt that I do not belong in this family is that things that have affected me massively were considered negatively by my family. Let me give one example. During my San Diego days, I occasionally drove to LA in the afternoon (of course, before rush hour), to have dinner there and see a show. One day (somewhere in the 90s), I saw the musical "[Rent](#)" at the Schubert theatre in Los Angeles with a fling from LA who I had met in one of San Diego's two gay discos, West Coast (WCPC). The story hit home hard and the lyrics had such an impact that its relatively simple melodies were lifted to a much higher level. Well, the two family members who also saw this musical walked out of it since there was not a single reason to stay! You have no idea how stunned I was when I heard them say this. It is possible that the Dutch version was terribly done, but my family doesn't know anything about AIDS, so one would think they would have wanted to stay to learn a bit more about this massive human tragedy. This is just one of the reasons why I have never shared with my family the horrors of AIDS in my life.

Another informative episode happened after gay marriage had been legalized in the Netherlands in 2001. In the Netherlands, the official part of all weddings takes place at City Hall and the problem was that several religious city hall civil servants refused to perform these necessary administrative duties when they involved gays or lesbians. It led to the creation of a new Dutch word, namely "weigerambtenaren" or "refusal civil servants." The discussion on whether these people had a right to refuse doing their job lasted for many years. During one big family event, my dad gave a passionate plea in defence of these "weigerambtenaren" because it would surely be very painful for them if they had to marriage gay people. In a room with three generations including my nieces and nephews who were already young adults, there was not a single person speaking against this. After having given up hope somebody would put up a counterargument, I asked the question whether it would be acceptable if a civil servant would refuse to perform the admin tasks for the marriage of ethnic minorities or mixed marriages. The question wasn't answered, but my father told me that I made a good point. So, I got credit for being a good debater, but nobody changed their mind.

The contempt for me and my character also crept to the surface when, for the first time, the possibility of me being gay came up. I think I was 20 or 21 and I was home for the weekend from college. We were drinking coffee after the rest of the family had come back from Sunday morning church. At some point, I changed the topic and started whining that it was very clear that my fellow students with fathers in high places had much better chances of getting a promising well-paid job after graduation. My father got incredibly angry at me. It was not unusual that my father would get really angry up to the point that he would turn red and raise his voice. My older brother and sister were also not spared those outbursts. Interestingly, my younger brother was the exception which says a lot about his ability to avoid conflict. Although, I had seen my father angry before, this fight set new records. To be fair, I

had a sharp tongue and knew how to hit back. I suspect that this was a fight about control. My father was really pissed that I didn't think about important issues the way he did. At some point, there was nothing left to do but pack my stuff and go back to my dorm room in Rotterdam. When I left the room, my dad asked "doe jij zo omdat je homoseksueel bent "[do you behave like this because you are a homosexual]? Apparently, there is something so wrong with the brains of homosexuals that they see unfairness in the world where there is none and they cannot understand the divine wisdom of conservative religion that tells that all happens for a reason. During the quarrel, my anger had reached peak levels, but the moment he asked that question, I saw the humour of it and almost started laughing. I answered in complete honesty: No, meaning, No I do not behave like this because I am a homosexual. I have to admit though that I was quite happy that he had not simply asked whether I was gay. By the way, the nice Dutch term to use in those days was homo not "homoseksueel." The formal term homoseksueel was used by people who had difficulty accepting queers.ⁱⁱ

I have to admit that I have treated my family with disdain as well. That may explain in part why they cannot accept that I — the not-believing sinner — can have success. But then it has not been a fair battle, because I have always stood alone in this very large religious family all supportive of anti-gay conservative christian organisations and political parties. Interestingly, they find themselves terribly progressive since they actually would not refuse a cup of coffee to gay people. In fact, they would think it their christian duty to feel sorry for these people. How wonderful it has been to have had some teachers who, from an early age, did recognize my talents and did give me praise and a bit of confidence. Special thanks go to Messrs. Huslage and de Leeuw van Weenen who told a twelve-year old me that I was a really smart kid and to my CMU supervisors, Albert Marcet and Ben McCallum.

Let's discuss a bit more what the church had to say about being gay when I was growing up. A 2010 report of the Netherlands Research Institute for Social Research,ⁱⁱⁱ describes the (lack of) acceptance of Dutch protestant churches and makes quite clear how difficult it has been for the self-proclaimed judges of right and wrong to simply get over it and accept queers as normal human beings and not as perverts or (which I hated a lot more) people who one has to feel sorry for and be given sympathy by the believers because they are not heterosexual. This publication quotes and describes a report accepted by the Synode of the Nederlands Hervormde Kerk in 1972. The hypocrisy is mind blowing and I copy it here because it perfectly characterizes what I faced when I started to discover my feelings for boys (I was 10 in 1972): "*De homoseksuele mens is gelijkwaardig aan de heteroseksuele. [...] Daarom moet ook de maatschappij als geheel hem aanvaarden' Homoseksualiteit was echter een afwijking, en zou in de bijbel wel degelijk worden afgekeurd. Anderzijds bekleemtoonde de auteur dat 'genezing' niet altijd mogelijk was.*" It says that homosexuals are equal to heterosexuals and have to be accepted [👉], but it is clear that it [homosexuality] is an abnormality [😬] that cannot always be 'cured' [😬] and is condemned in the bible [😬].

The SCP report mainly describes official positions and some exceptions implemented by a few less conservative ministers. It doesn't do a good job describing how typical churchgoers thought about it. But I think quite representative is the following quote from my father at the end of the 70s: "*We moeten het dan maar*

accepteren, maar het valt absoluut niet te begrijpen.” In English: we are faced with a situation where we have no choice but to accept it [homosexuality], but it is absolutely not understandable. But even more hurtful was when he told me during an angry outburst that *“de duivel zit in jou”* (the devil lives inside you). It was never clear whether this was or wasn’t related to me obviously being different, but I never heard him say anything even close to this to my three siblings. And the older two clearly outdid me in terms of how often they upset him because of things like coming home too late and going to unsavoury places, i.e., where one gets drunk and drugs are used.

One more thing has to be mentioned here. I was forced to go to bible study every week. When I was 14, a church warden got quite upset with me because I was pushing the boundaries a bit. Not uncommon, also not in school. In many things I am a chicken, but during primary and secondary school I couldn’t keep my mouth shut.^{iv} He told me that all of us could die any moment in some accident and he insisted that I told him whether I was ready for god’s judgement if I would die tomorrow. To be fair, this threatening about judgement day was not that common, but I remember it as a turning point in my life and a clear signal that I didn’t want to have anything to do with christianity. What really stunned and upset me — and made me feel very lonely — was that the two friends with whom I walked home afterwards (who actually were usually partners in crime), argued that the man was a jerk but did have a point, because yeah we could be hit by a bus tomorrow.

I am so grateful that I could escape to the US where I could distance myself from my family and where I learned that I actually do have some quite worthwhile talents.

“Do not pronounce judgement before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purpose of the heart. Then each one will receive commendation from God. (1 Corinthians 4:5)”

ⁱ From: Sadownick, Douglas. “Surviving Life: An Interview with AIDS Diva Michael Callen.” *Frontiers*.

ⁱⁱ I have some tips for parents who have children who whine that their fellow students have better chances than they do. I would suggest you admit that the world is indeed not fair. You will earn bonus points if you add that you wish you could have given them what they crave for. Then you can say that you wonder whether — although the world obviously isn’t a fair place — it is as unfair as it may seem at first glance. Successful people also have problems, but you do not always see them. Finally, you can suggest that life is easier if you not only look up, but also look down at the people who have less.

ⁱⁱⁱ SCP, 2010, De aard, de daad en het Woord. Een halve eeuw opinie- en besluitvorming over homoseksualiteit in protestants Nederlands, 1959-2009.

^{iv} In my primary school, pupils sat in groups of four. At the beginning of the last year of primary school, the teacher split our group up and during the rest of the year I sat by myself. I actually liked this teacher, Mr van der Wiel, a lot. I cannot resist sharing an experience even though it doesn’t really fit in the overall theme. But it does say a bit about my character as a young boy. Mr van der Wiel was the headmaster and on Tuesday and Thursday afternoon he would work in his office and we were taught by Ms de Graaf, a retired teacher. She was awful. Anyway, one afternoon she had sent me to the corridor as punishment. My heart skipped a couple beats when I heard Mr. van der Wiel coming my way. But he was in a good mood and asked me, with a grin on his face, what I had done this time to end up in the corridor. He told me that he had an errand for me, namely bringing the milk money to the bank (students that paid for it got milk during the day). It wasn’t a lot of money and this is the seventies in a safe boring neighbourhood. This became my weekly task. The best part was how Mr van der Wiel summoned me. The man was very lazy; he drove to school in his car even though he

lived close by. Part of the school had a U-shape and our class room and his office were on the on the legs of the U with part of the schoolyard in between. Big windows on both sides. So instead of coming over he would just stand there and when I was looking his way, he would indicate that the needed me. I would get up and walk out. When Ms de Graaf would ask me what I was doing, I told her with lots of pride and a bit of disdain that the headmaster wanted me. Now here comes the funny part. For decades, I truly believed that Mr. van der Wiel had chosen me for this special task because he trusted me more than all the other students. Yes, I couldn't always keep my mouth shut and had difficulty to keep all four legs of my chair on the floor, but when it came to the important stuff, I was the ideal choice. I didn't doubt this way of thinking about it and cherished the memory for years. Until a friend started laughing when I told the story and pointed out that it was much more likely that Mr van der Wiel gave me a desirable task in the hope that I would modify my behaviour in order to retain my position as the "bank boy."